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REVIEW and OUTLOOK

An Intellectual Wasteland

Attacks on capitalism are hardly a rarity in academic circles, but the lack of intellectual vigor in some of them is a little surprising. Perhaps it reflects a more general poverty of contemporary thinking about fundamental issues.

If so, it may be worth taking a look at one such effort, a lengthy pamphlet fresh from the presses of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Called "Toward Community," its author is Richard Lichtman, described as a fellow in residence at the Center who also teaches at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Mr. Lichtman begins by noting that capitalism is frequently viewed as a theoretically admirable economic system which unfortunately doesn't work out too well in practice. That is, it has to be diluted with a heavy admixture of State intervention, leading to the so-called welfare capitalism we have today.

This criticism, in the author's opinion, misses the point. Not only are laissez-faire capitalism and welfare capitalism both beyond the pale; the very theory of capitalism is also defective. What does he believe to be wrong with the theory, as distinct from the practice, of the capitalistic market?

A major deficiency in the market concept, or so Mr. Lichtman argues, is that it must reduce everything to price and that kind of quantification cannot express the values that make up the quality of life. "... such factors as comfort, beauty, convenience and power—some of the values in terms of which we buy and sell economic commodities—are qualities incapable of numerical measure."

Although the argument is developed at considerable length and with many allusions to philosophers and economists, it seems not particularly difficult to refute. Experience amply attests that the "quantification" of the market is in no way incompatible with quality, whether one is talking about social justice or esthetics.

On the contrary, a close connection exists between capitalistic materialism and qualitative values. The market in America has showered material well-being on the masses; that provision, in turn, has made possible more educa-

tion, more mass participation in culture (even if the results aren't always happy), more health care, more leisure for whatever purpose and much else besides.

Certainly no other form of economic organization has ever done anything like so much for so many, materially and spiritually. But then Mr. Lichtman evidently isn't interested in the study of comparative economic systems. He is interested in rejecting capitalism and promoting something he terms community.

The notion of community is not defined with any great lucidity, but its outlines can be inferred: "The principles of equality and social value that characterize a community are inimical to every form of capitalism. The systems of community and market are irreconcilably opposed; whether the government be night-watchman or dispenser of welfare, until it becomes the agency of a whole people acting for the common good, it is not the appropriate vehicle for the moral life of man."

A reader of those words might be excused if he confuses "community" with some type of theoretical communism. Whatever it is, it sounds thoroughly awful from the standpoint of anyone who believes in free men and free nations.

As may be apparent by now, we find scant philosophical merit in this particular treatise, and that is the reason for commenting on it. Here is a tirade put out in rather elaborate format by an offshoot of the Fund for the Republic, an organization boasting some respectable names. It will be mulled in innumerable university and editorial rooms, exactly as though it were a serious basis for intellectual discussion.

And the case is only too typical of a good deal of contemporary veneration of non-thinking. We refer not so much to the rantings of the "New Left" but more to a sustained assault—sometimes from academicians, sometimes from Government officials, sometimes from politicians—on the essential values of individual dignity and respect that underlie a free society.

A free society, by definition, can take a lot of such abuse. It need not take pride in the quality of much of the discourse.